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OCI No. 1838/63
21 May 63

MEMORANDUM FOR: The Special Group (CI)

SUBJECT : Alternatives in the Event of the
Demise of President Diem

I. THE POWER FACTORS

A. The Constitutional Successors

The constitutional line of succession to President Diem is Vice President Tho followed by National Assembly President Le. Neither man nor position holds real political power. As constitutional successors, they nevertheless offer an immediate rallying point as front men for a more vigorous group behind them.

B. The Ngo Brothers

Diem's four brothers, Nhu, Can, Luyen, and Archbishop Thuc, exercise real political power stemming from their covert mechanisms of control and their associations with the President. Although Diem's death would be a setback to them, their entrenched position gives them a significant early advantage in a bid for succession with other power factors. Of the four brothers, only Nhu is probably a serious contender. In the past year he has moved increasingly onto the public stage from his role as a power behind the scenes.

C. The Army

The army probably holds the key to power in the country. No leader could remain in power without at least its passive support. Lack of unity in the army, however, could render it incapable of effective, independent action in the early stages unless provided sufficient sound political guidance. This weakness was clearly evident in the November 1960 coup attempt. The lesson of the November 1960 experience demonstrated this quite clearly. Nonetheless, three or four generals show considerable

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strength of character or popularity and might emerge to lead a military takeover, particularly if the situation began to disintegrate to such an extent that the security of the country was threatened.

D. The Administration

Among a number of prominent, popular or efficient ministers in the present administration, none appears to have enough power or influence to succeed Diem in his own right. Some, however, might provide important support to one of the other contenders.

E. The Oppositionists

Although there are a number of capable and influential opposition figures both within and without the country, they are out of touch with the real instruments of power. It is doubtful that any of them has the ability to influence the selection of a successor regime, although some, including persons now in exile, might be called upon to advise or serve a government dominated by a ruling military junta. Within the country, the most important nongovernmental grouping is the Dai Viet, headed by Phan Huy Quat and Dang Van Sung. This group may have a fairly substantial, if quiescent, membership, including some adherents now occupying governmental positions, particularly in the Ministry of Civic Action. The best-known oppositionists in South Vietnam, Dr. Phan Quang Dan and Pham Khac Suu, have been under detention since the November 1960 coup and have little potential for active influence.

F. Labor

Labor in South Vietnam is not well enough organized to take the lead in determining a successor regime. The support of key labor leaders, such as Tran Quoc Buu, would be an asset to a serious contender and Buu's organization might influence the outcome of a contest in the Saigon-Cholon area.

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G. The Communists

The Communists can be counted on to make a bid for power in the event of President Diem's death, using their front organization, the National Front for the Liberation of South Vietnam. Although the Front lacks the means to seize power directly, it could emerge as an increasingly important alternative in the event that a struggle for power by the major contenders remained unresolved for a considerable period of time.

II. THE MOST LIKELY DEVELOPMENTS

A. The most probable initial development following the death of President Diem would appear to be an effort to conform to the constitution, with Vice President Tho succeeding Diem. It is questionable, however, if Tho could actually inherit real power. He has not been regarded as a strong leader, but is considered an administrator of some talent and in time might emerge as a qualified leader. Unlike the Ngo family, from central Vietnam, Tho is of southern Vietnamese origin, in a country where regional loyalties are of considerable weight. It appears, however, that Tho would be dependent upon strong support from key army officers and that he would remain no more than a titular president.

B. It seems likely that Nhu, with or without support from Can, would make an early bid for succession to Diem. If he were able to assume power quickly, he might succeed, at least initially in averting a serious, decisive challenge. Nhu and his wife, however, have long been the focal point of widespread criticism and opposition to the regime. During the past year, he has been endeavoring to redress this image and to strengthen his position among the military, the administration and the public through a more open role, particularly in the promotion of the Strategic Hamlet Program. It remains questionable, however, whether he would be tolerated by the military.

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C. If, however, Diem remains in power for the next few years and if success of the Strategic Hamlet Program substantially strengthens Nhu's political base and popular image, the latter's chances of succeeding his brother will be good. Otherwise, the most likely ultimate outcome would appear to be some form of rule by a military junta, either ruling directly or through a civilian front man or group.

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Next 1 Page(s) In Document Exempt